

# North Made Private Deal For Hostages on Tehran Visit

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In the early morning hours of May 28, 1986, while other members of a White House delegation were asleep in the former Tehran Hilton, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North unilaterally struck an arms-for-hostages deal and summoned a plane-load of U.S. weapons from Israel as part of the bargain, informed sources said yesterday.

North, then a member of the National Security Council (NSC) staff, secretly ordered the waiting airplane filled with missile spare parts to fly to Iran after he had tentatively reached a private agreement with Iranian middleman Manucher Ghorbanifar that two American hostages would be released when the shipment arrived, according to the sources.

However, when North later awakened his boss on the mission, former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, and informed him of the private agreement, McFarlane rejected the deal and insisted that all four Americans held in Lebanon at that time be released. Just as the aircraft was reaching its final checkpoint before turning toward Iran, McFarlane used a secret communications system to order the plane back to Tel Aviv, the sources said.

McFarlane had clandestinely arrived in Tehran three days earlier as part of a White House effort to swap U.S. weaponry for American hostages held by Iranian-backed extremists in Lebanon and open a dialogue with the Iran regime.

North's predawn free-lancing and McFarlane's subsequent veto were cited yesterday by one top investigator into the Iran-contra affair as further evidence of the "terribly amateurish and unprofessional way" in which President Reagan's high-risk initiative was handled.

Congressional investigators are also studying the episode to determine why Reagan kept North involved in the Iranian and contra operations despite suggestions from McFarlane and others after the May trip that North be relieved of responsibility for at least one of the operations.

North's attorney, Brendan Sullivan Jr., did not return a phone call to comment on his client's role. A source close to McFarlane said yesterday that the account of North's free-lancing was "essentially accurate." However, a source close to the Tower review board said neither McFarlane nor anyone else had given these details to the board.

On May 27, the day preceding North's nocturnal negotiations, McFarlane had steadfastly refused to deliver any more arms to Tehran until the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini agreed to the release of the four Americans then held in Lebanon.

McFarlane had brought a small sample of Hawk antiaircraft missile spare parts requested by the Iranians, and expected all of the hostages to be freed before his arrival in Tehran because of Iranian promises to that effect. The Americans, under an earlier deal, had sent 1,000 TOW antitank missiles to Tehran the previous February and none of the hostages had been freed.

In a negotiating session on the afternoon of May 27, the foreign affairs adviser to Iranian parliament speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani proposed that McFarlane order an aircraft with additional Hawk parts to begin its flight to Iran from Tel Aviv where it was awaiting further instructions. "If the plane arrives before tomorrow morning, the hostages will be freed by noon," the Iranian said, according to a summary of the meeting sent back to the White House by McFarlane and released two months ago by the special review board headed by former senator John G. Tower (R-Tex.).

McFarlane, however, told the Iranians that Reagan had lost patience and wanted the hostages released within 10 hours or the American delegation would leave. The United States, McFarlane said in reference to the earlier TOW shipments, had already delivered "hundreds of weapons."

McFarlane then demanded: "You can release the hostages, advise us, and we will deliver the weapons," according to the White House summary.

That session concluded at 6 p.m. with both sides saying they would review the situation.

At 9:30 p.m., the two groups met again with North leading the Americans. He said that McFarlane wanted word on the hostage release by 4 a.m. or he would leave Tehran. The Iranian spokesman said his government was negotiating with the captors in Beirut but that, "There still is a lot of work to do. We cannot make a final decision on when they will be released," the summary said.

McFarlane then appeared and began new discussions. At 11:30 p.m., McFarlane concluded "that [the Iranians] are just stringing us along." He gave "the order to pack and depart."

However, the Americans discovered that despite the Iranians' promise two hours earlier that they would refuel the delegation's airplane, it had not been done and the departure was delayed.

At 2 a.m., the Iranian adviser arrived at the hotel to ask for a delay until 6 a.m., by which time he said there would be word on the hostages. McFarlane responded, according to the summary, "If you give us a time, we will launch the aircraft [with the Hawk spares] so that it will land here two hours after the hostages are in U.S. custody."

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McFarlane then went to bed. North, however, met with Ghorbanifar, according to the informed sources. They agreed on a plan, which Ghorbanifar later said he had cleared with Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, that two hostages would be freed when the plane arrived. Two more hostages would be released the next day and the body of William Buckley, the Central Intelligence Agency Beirut station chief who had died in captivity in 1985, would be delivered to U.S. representatives.

North sent the signal to Tel Aviv and the aircraft took off, the sources said. Shortly afterward, North awakened McFarlane to tell him what he had done. After blocking the North deal, McFarlane assembled the delegation and, ignoring Iranian entreaties, left for the airport. McFarlane told an Iranian negotiator to tell his "superiors that this was the fourth time they had failed to honor an agreement. The lack of trust will endure for a long time."